

The First Special Service Force:Waste of an Elite Unit or Mountain 'Rangers' at the Perfect Time?

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REVIEW ESSAY

**The First Special Service Force:
Waste of an Elite Unit or Mountain ‘Rangers’ at the Perfect Time?**

Wood, James A. *We Move Only Forward: Canada, the United States and the First Special Service Force, 1942-1944*. St. Catharines, ON: Vanwell, 2006.

Joyce, Kenneth H. *Snow Plough and the Jupiter Deception: The Story of the 1st Special Service Force and the 1st Canadian Special Service Battalion, 1942-1945*. St. Catharines, ON: Vanwell, 2006.

The latest two books published on the Canadian-American First Special Service Force (FSSF) indicate that interest in the hybrid multi-national ranger-commando brigade remains high. “The Force,” as it was known to men who served in it, bears all the ingredients needed to capture public imagination now, just as it did during the war. It was an elite mountain and winter-warfare trained parachute unit made up of hunters, trappers, and lumberjacks from the North American wilderness on both sides of the Canada-US border and a unique experiment in Allied military cooperation. The romantic, larger-than-life story was enough even to capture Hollywood’s attention and resulted in a popular film version known as *The Devil’s Brigade*. Most recently, the Canadian Government announced that the secret counter-terrorist and special operations unit known by the rather inglorious name of Joint Task Force 2 (JTF 2) will be renamed after the Canadian component of the wartime FSSF, 1st Canadian Special Service Battalion. Likewise, the newly created Canadian Special Operations Regiment will be renamed 2nd CSS Battalion. With these names come the many battle-honours, unit lineage, and traditions of the Force. This recognition of the achievements and heroism of Canadians within the Force will be welcomed by veterans who, as both of these new books acknowledge, often felt swallowed by the United States Army and forgotten by their own nation.

Both of these new books about the Force, James A. Wood’s *We Move Only Forward: Canada, the United States and the First Special Service Force, 1942-1944*, and Kenneth H. Joyce’s *Snow Plough and the Jupiter Deception: The Story of the 1st Special Service Force and the 1st Canadian Special Service Battalion, 1942-1945*, were produced by Vanwell Publishing in 2006 as if to compliment one another. Both examine the same issues surrounding Canadian participation in the Force from its creation and training in 1942, through the cancellation of the mission for which it was first designed, its deployment to Alaska and then to the Mediterranean, and intense combat until its anti-climactic disbandment on 5 December 1944. Both books tackle questions about how Canada

became involved and what kind of mission Canadian Army leaders understood the Force was intended for. Existing accounts, nearly all from an American perspective, only tell the story of the Force's combat record. Wood and Joyce both reveal that because the blending of Canadian and American personnel in mixed companies was a blessing and a curse, it is impossible to fully appreciate the contribution of the Force to the war effort without understanding the formation's organizational character.

Raised for a secret sabotage mission to divert German resources to Norway that was later cancelled, the mythology goes that the highly trained special operations soldiers of the First Special Service Force were squandered as line infantry in the grinding attritional combat of the Italian campaign in 1943-44. Like all enduring myths, this one grows from fact mixed with bits of fiction and misunderstanding.

Serious students of the First Special Service Force ought to read these two books together. Wood's should be first as his is the more effective analysis of Canadian involvement in the Force and the concept for its use. His interpretation centres on the impact of administrative hurdles faced by these elite volunteers as they trained first for a one-off mission to cripple critical infrastructure supporting important German naval and air bases in Norway, then as special assault infantry for use on some other snowbound mission or target of high strategic value. Administration issues may not seem worthy of a story that should be more about daring adventure. However, Wood brilliantly demonstrates that the isolation of 700 high-quality Canadian soldiers in what was really a US Army formation and misunderstandings about whether they required a system to replace training and battle casualties led directly to the demise of the First Special Service Force. "Without detracting from what Canadian and American soldiers were able to achieve together, by viewing the Force from the perspective of higher headquarters it becomes possible to understand why the unit was disbanded and why, in spite of its achievements, there has been no attempt by Canada and the United States to repeat the experiment." (Wood, p. 15)

The concept of forming an elite "throw-away" force of demolition and sabotage specialists for use in Norway grew out of the dark and desperate days of early 1942 when Allied military planners searched for ways to take the offensive against Germany. Wood notes that the Canadian Government saw Canadian participation as a "means of exerting some small influence in matters of great strategic importance." (Wood, p. 30) But even as the First Special Service Force assembled for serious training in Montana in the summer and fall of 1942, the Norway sabotage mission was scrubbed. The idea of Canadian and American soldiers completely intermixed as a unit of elite North Americans was not abandoned and thus began their reorganization as special "assault infantry" force and a search for a remote, snow-covered, and mountainous target suited to its capability. By the end of 1942, Canadian and American authorities agreed that Allied

efforts in the Mediterranean basin offered the best possibilities.

Among Wood's most interesting revelations is that another original concept not abandoned with the Norway mission was that the Force was still a 'one-off' asset to be used for a single mission of strategic import. This idea informed the question of whether or not the new assault infantry "Ranger-type" Force required a replacement pool for sustained combat. The issue was repeatedly raised by Canadian authorities who were reminded by the Americans, especially the FSSF commander, Colonel Robert T. Frederick, that the Force was only to be used once. Wood determines that the issue was one of timing more than short-sightedness. Colonel Frederick saw the value of a replacement system but worried that creating it would take too long and delay the immediate 1943 deployment of his men who volunteered for the unit with the promise of early combat. (Wood, p. 66)

In contrast, Kenneth Joyce offers up an intensely detailed forced march through nearly all documents relating to the existence of the Force, including its training, special equipment development, and combat service. These details are mixed with interviews with veterans. Missing from Joyce's book is the kind of filtering, interpretation, and cross-referencing with other historical scholarship necessary for readers to navigate his vast array of information. The result is that the significance of key evidence is sometimes unclear. For example, Joyce includes mountains of information and document excerpts about training routines, Canadian administration, armoured snow vehicles experimentation, and deliberations about where the Force would be employed. The threads often lay in his chapters as a jumble that is difficult to follow.

Joyce's most valuable contribution is to describe Winston Churchill and Lord Mountbatten's vision of employing the Force in a full-scale invasion of Norway or at least for the "Jupiter Deception" scheme to convince the Germans of the threat to Norway. (Joyce, p. 89) Unfortunately, these findings are not balanced with an explanation of the known rift between Winston Churchill and senior British and American military leaders that led to the British prime minister's marginalization in military planning beginning in 1942. Nor is there much context about the enormous difficulties facing the Combined Chiefs of Staff in 1942 as they coped with more pressing problems. Nevertheless, Joyce raises important questions about where Norway, "Jupiter," and the raising of special forces for deception as much as for action fitted into Allied strategy early in the war.

Joyce's account, although sometimes unfiltered, is rich with the kind of detail that allows readers to piece together a more complete picture of the Force, especially the Canadian contribution. When read after Wood's more rigorous and structured account, Joyce's detail adds color to the story. The same holds true when these books turn to explaining what happens when the formation faces the test of battle in Italy.

Wood and Joyce both allude to but never quite drive home the irony of how deploying the FSSF to Italy, where most believe it was wasted as line infantry, was exactly what allowed it to fulfill its destiny as a “throw-away” mountain commando force on a mission no other unit could achieve. All histories of the Force, including these latest two volumes, necessarily emphasize the elite character and capability of the Force over operational circumstances in late 1943 Italy. This focus steers historical inquiry toward two related problems. First, that the ‘special’ abilities were underutilized, and second, that because the Force was organized for a single use on a high-value target, it did not have the integral heavy weaponry, training, or combat support services needed to remain in front-line combat for prolonged periods. Wood and Joyce present evidence confirming that the latter was true. But, a closer look at the operational problem facing the Allies in Italy, including an analysis of terrain and weather conditions offers a different conclusion on the matter of getting the full value out of the elite formation.

The Force arrived in Italy in the desperate last weeks of 1943, when all Allied units were exhausted by months of combat. The German decision to reinforce the Italian front and engage in a wasting battle of attrition played to Allied strategy of diverting attention from the invasion of Normandy planned for the following spring. But it also meant that the German Army in Italy must be continuously attacked and ground down if the grand plan of preventing it from interfering in Normandy was to be achieved. Therefore, Allied commanders ruled that offensive operations in Italy must continue no matter what the state of the troops, ground, and weather.

By November-December 1943, German units were driven back into belts of combined man-made defences and natural obstacles known collectively as the Winter Line. In the deteriorating winter weather, German defenders were ably supported by Generals ‘Rain’ and ‘Mud’ who made approaches passable only with great difficulty and extraordinary physical endurance. To make matters worse, the Winter Line belts were anchored on mountain massifs and individual peaks that funneled attackers into predictable killing zones and provided German artillery observers with excellent observation deep into key valleys and road networks vital for modern armies to sustain and feed their combat efforts.

The most famous of these mountain positions was Mont Cairo and its outer bastion of Monte Cassino. These features gained notoriety as the anchor of the Gustav Line during the four “Battles of Cassino” between January and May 1944. The steep foothills and wide valleys that lay beneath provided ample space for large formations to meet in close combat. Those battles led to brutal losses and recriminations on both sides in years afterwards, but there is no doubt they accomplished the Combined Chiefs of Staff intended mission of pinning and destroying the greater part of the German 14th Army and rendering the German forces in the Mediterranean incapable of interfering with the D-Day

landings.¹ Most familiar with the campaign know that it was no accident that Rome fell on 4 June 1944, marking the end of the Cassino battles. First Special Service Force played an integral role in those battles by helping to hold the Anzio perimeter, spearheading the May 1944 break-out, and even with the liberation of Rome in June. Wood and Joyce demonstrate how in that period that the Force was undoubtedly ill-used, its manpower burned up and its special capabilities wrecked, even if it rendered yeoman service.

However, before great battles could begin on the vast Cassino battle space, the strong outpost positions barring access to the Gustav Line had to be breached. Today, visitors to what was known as the Mignano Gap in 1943 can plainly see how small numbers of Germans with strong artillery support could hold back a much larger Allied Force indefinitely in that narrow mountain pass. Defeating German units holding the Bernhard Line outer works meant taking control of the mountain ramparts of Monte di Difensa, Monte Sammucro, and Monte Majo. These peaks dominated the ground around them for dozens of miles. Indeed, on a clear day one can see the Alban Hills near Anzio from atop Sammucro and Majo. Unfortunately, by November the line divisions of Fifth US Army, including 10th British Corps, were exhausted from their fight in the bloody Salerno beachhead and the difficult crossing of the Volturno River in the fall. Initial attempts to attack German units over more gradual, but fire swept approaches to the Bernhard Line peaks failed at high cost. At the time 5th Army had no units with specialized training and equipment to operate for prolonged periods in high country that could outflank the mountain positions.

What the Allies needed were special troops complete with a combination of mountaineering equipment, light man-packable machine guns and mortars, cold weather protective gear, and extraordinary fitness levels required to attack Mother Nature and the Germans simultaneously. Enter the First Special Service Force. The commander of 5th US Army immediately put the Force to work in their intended role. Few argue that Force capabilities were not fully employed in its first battle at Monte di Difensa in December 1943. There, the Force surprised German defenders by scaling what the latter believed was an impossible cliff. Wood and Joyce acknowledge that keeping ammunition flowing up the cliffs to grind up German counter-attacks was more challenging than the initial assault. The hard-won position was then exploited to lever two full corps forward on both flanks.

Without having long to rest or grieve the terrible losses from the Difensa ordeal, the Force was immediately pressed into service on Sammucro and Majo. When these mountaintop battles were over and the Force pulled out of the line in mid-January 1944, it had lost half its number and ceased to be combat effective. With the heavy losses came criticisms that the Force was wasted. The source of much of that criticism then and among historians after the fact originates with a report filed by the senior Canadian officer, Lieutenant-Colonel Thomas P. Gilday. Gilday argued that the Force was squandered as “glorified infantry with

all the special training going by the boards, except possibly mountain climbing.” Wood describes how, in light of their losses, Gilday and Col. Frederick argued for disbandment of the Force and the return of its Canadians to their own army. (Wood, pp. 95-99) The weakened Force that later held the Mussolini Canal at Anzio and captured Rome’s Tiber bridges may still have been highly successful, but it was never the same elite mountain assault group that it was in the Bernhard Line.

What Gilday and those who cite him may not appreciate is that taking and holding Monte Majo was a job only the Force could accomplish, especially if the rest of 5th Army was to be intact for the coming showdown at Cassino. Among the casualties suffered on Majo were many from frostbite and exposure in the high-altitude winter conditions. These within a unit trained and equipped for winter survival. Brilliant photographs found in both books reveal how specialized clothing, equipment, and assault weapons enabled the Force to function on Majo. One can only imagine what the losses may have been like if the 36th Texas Division or the 45th ‘Thunderbirds’ from the American southwest were the only troops available for the job. The lesson was not lost on Allied commanders. It was during the winter of 1943-44 that they fully grasped that mountain trained and equipped troops, with a replacement system, light artillery, mule trains, and all the support structures for sustained combat, were necessary in this theatre. It is the same realization that saw the French Expeditionary Corps used for mountain hooks around the Gustav Line and that drew 10th US Mountain Division to Italy late in 1944. But that all came after Majo fell.

Monte Majo may not have been a Norwegian heavy-water plant or strategic panacea target, but visitors to the ancient Benedictine Abbey on Monte Cassino can look across the broad valley of the Gari River and see how the snow-capped peak dominates the landscape as much or more than the famous one at Cassino. Without those Bernhard Line mountaintops captured in winter, there could be no broad front pressure on the Gustav Line in the spring that could help bring victory on D-Day in Normandy. To their fellow Allied soldiers fighting in Italy and elsewhere then, Difensa, Sammucro, and Majo were most certainly the high-value targets that warranted launching the First Special Service Force on its fateful ‘one-off’ mission.

Lee Windsor is the Deputy Director of the Brigadier Milton F. Gregg, VC, Centre for the Study of War and Society at the University of New Brunswick.

Endnotes

1. Lee Windsor, “Anatomy of Victory: 1st Canadian Corps, Allied Containment Strategy and the Battle for the Gothic Line,” PhD Dissertation, 2006, University of New Brunswick, pp 48-60.